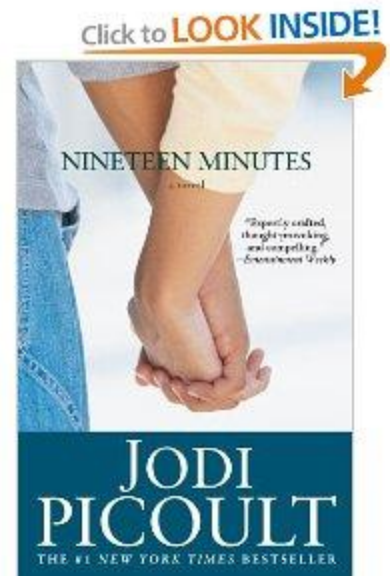


Nineteen Minutes by Jodi Picoult

Read Aloud from pg.8-10



Sometimes Josie thought of her life as a room with no doors and no windows. It was a sumptuous room, sure — a room half the kids in Sterling High would have given their right arm to enter — but it was also a room from which there really wasn't an escape. Either Josie was someone she didn't want to be, or she was someone who nobody wanted.

She lifted her face to the spray of the shower — water she'd made so hot it raised red welts, stole breath, steamed windows. She counted to ten, and then finally ducked away from the stream to stand naked and dripping in front of the mirror. Her face was swollen and scarlet; her hair stuck to her shoulders in thick ropes. She turned sideways, scrutinized her flat belly, and sucked it in a little. She knew what Matt saw when he looked at her, what Courtney and Maddie and Brady and Haley and Drew all saw — she just wished that she could see it, too. The problem was, when Josie looked in the mirror, she noticed what was underneath that raw skin, instead of what had been painted upon it.

She understood how she was *supposed* to look and *supposed* to act. She wore her dark hair long and straight; she dressed in Abercrombie & Fitch;

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she listened to Dashboard Confessional and Death Cab for Cutie. She liked feeling the eyes of other girls in the school when she sat in the cafeteria borrowing Courtney's makeup. She liked the way teachers already knew her name on the first day of class. She liked having guys stare at her when she walked down the hall with Matt's arm around her.

But there was a part of her that wondered what would happen if she let them all in on the secret—that some mornings, it was hard to get out of bed and put on someone else's smile; that she was standing on air, a fake who laughed at all the right jokes and whispered all the right gossip and attracted the right guy, a fake who had nearly forgotten what it felt like to be *real* . . . and who, when you got right down to it, didn't want to remember, because it hurt even more than this.

There wasn't anyone to talk to. If you even *doubted* your right to be one of the privileged, popular set, then you didn't belong there. And Matt—well, he'd fallen for the Josie on the surface, like everyone else. In fairy tales, when the mask came off, the handsome prince still loved the girl, no matter what—and that alone would turn her into a princess. But high school didn't work that way. What made her a princess was hooking up with Matt. And in some weird circular logic, what made Matt hook up with her was the very fact that she was one of Sterling High's princesses.

She couldn't confide in her mother, either. You don't start being a judge

She couldn't confide in her mother, either. *You don't stop being a judge just because you step out of the courthouse*, her mother used to say. It was why Alex Cormier never drank more than one glass of wine in public; it was why she never yelled or cried. A trial was a stupid word, considering that an attempt was never good enough: you were supposed to toe the line, period. Many of the accomplishments that Josie's mother was most proud of—Josie's grades, her looks, her acceptance into the “right” crowd—had not been achieved because Josie wanted them so badly herself, but mostly because she was afraid of falling short of perfect.

Josie wrapped a towel around herself and headed into her bedroom. She pulled a pair of jeans out of her closet and then layered two long-sleeved tees that showed off her chest. She glanced at her clock—if she wasn't going to be late, she'd have to get moving.

Before leaving her room, though, she hesitated. She sank down onto her bed and rummaged underneath the nightstand for the Ziploc sandwich bag that she'd tacked to the wooden frame. Inside was a stash of Ambien—pirated one pill at a time from her mother's prescription for insomnia, so she'd never notice. It had taken Josie nearly six months to inconspicuously gather only fifteen pills, but she figured if she washed them down with a fifth

of vodka, it would do the trick. It wasn't like she had a strategy, really, to kill herself next Tuesday, or when the snow melted, or anything concrete like that. It was more like a backup plan: When the truth came out, and no one wanted to be around her anymore, it stood to reason Josie wouldn't want to be around herself either.

She tacked the pills back beneath her nightstand and headed downstairs. As she walked into the kitchen to load up her backpack, she found her chemistry textbook still wide open—and a long-stemmed red rose marking her place.

Matt was leaning against the refrigerator in the corner; he must have let himself in through the open garage door. Like always, he made her head swim with seasons—his hair was all the colors of autumn; his eyes the bright blue of a winter sky; his smile as wide as any summer sun. He was wearing a baseball hat backward, and a Sterling Varsity Hockey tee over a thermal shirt that Josie had once stolen for a full month and hidden in her underwear drawer, so that when she needed to she could breathe in the scent of him. “Are you still pissed off?” he asked.

Josie hesitated. “I wasn't the one who was mad.”

Matt pushed away from the refrigerator, coming forward until he could link his arms around Josie's waist. “You know I can't help it.”

A dimple blossomed in his right cheek; Josie could already feel herself softening. “It wasn’t that I didn’t want to see you. I really *did* have to study.”

Matt pushed her hair off her face and kissed her. This was exactly why she’d told him not to come over last night—when she was with him, she felt herself evaporating. Sometimes, when he touched her, Josie imagined herself vanishing in a puff of steam.

He tasted of maple syrup, of apologies. “It’s all your fault, you know,” he said. “I wouldn’t act as crazy if I didn’t love you so much.”

At that moment, Josie could not remember the pills she was hoarding in her room; she could not remember crying in the shower; she could not remember anything but what it felt like to be adored. *I’m lucky*, she told herself, the word streaming like a silver ribbon through her mind. *Lucky, lucky, lucky.*